

The Life of Faith: Prologue

'Faith' is a popular word to throw around. Employed by both Christians and non-believers in various sorts of contexts, it has come to have quite the nebulous definition. One might think that Christians have a better grasp on what the word means, seeing as the core of our religion rests on putting faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Although salvation by faith alone seems to be understood well enough by those adhering to an Evangelical flavor of Christianity, the purpose and efficacy of faith in other matters of life seems to have been marginalized due to our over-emphasis on grace and predestination. In hopes of avoiding irreverence, we oftentimes point to the providential grace of God to the extent of denying what Scripture teaches concerning our own actions, that is, that our faith and prayers have an objective effect outside of the believer. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate what the New Testament teaches about faith in non-salvific contexts, and how we are to apply this knowledge to our lives in a practical manner.

I have heard faith described by the following analogy: *two people are sitting next to one another on an airplane. One has faith in the ability of the plane and the competency of the pilot, while the other does not. During the flight, the man with faith is calm and confident, whereas the man without faith is fearful and uneasy. Neither the faith nor the lack thereof had any effect on the flight itself, but only worked to affect the disposition of each man throughout.* As regards faith exerted by Christians, this analogy is not entirely accurate. When a believer puts forth, or fails to put forth faith, not only is his disposition affected, but the flight is as well. Faith has an objective impact on things outside of the one who possesses it.

To a Western Christian mind, a mind that has been nurtured in the doubt-filled spirit of this age, the above idea probably sounds ridiculous, or even heretical. However, most of these sentiments come from a lack of experience, not a biblical teaching. We are not used to seeing the practical outworking of faith manifest in an obvious manner, or simply are ignorant of it when it does. Above and beyond our assumptions concerning predestination and God's sovereignty, as Christians we must be ready at a moment's notice to submit to the Word of God, no matter where that may take us. A commonly accepted method of hermeneutic is to interpret obscure passages in light of that which is clear. What if I told you that there are many more biblical passages that clearly point to the efficacy of faith and prayer than there are passages that clearly portray individual, non-salvific events as being predestined? Either way, if both are affirmed in Scripture, both are true, even if we are unable to perceive the mechanism whereby both function in harmony. Together we will now embark on a survey of New Testament narrative in order to draw out exactly what the Scriptures are teaching about non-salvific faith. Over a dozen examples will be shown to affirm the efficacy of faith outside the one who possesses it. Some are descriptive narrative, while others are records of Jesus teaching, thus making that particular passage didactic. Nonetheless, the sheer amount of text the Bible devotes to this topic should be enough to convince even the most skeptical believer.

The Life of Faith: Lesson 1 (Collecting the Data)

A Primer for Faith

James 2:14-26 (read through this passage as a group)

What is the main point that James is making in this passage? *Answer: he is emphasizing the practical outworking of faith. Just saying that faith is present is not enough. It ought to be evident apart from any verbal affirmation. (This principle of an invisible faith affecting visible realities will carry over into other contexts, as we will see through the rest of this lesson).*

Group A: Faith Producing Positive Outcomes for the One Exerting It¹

Example 1: ‘The Woman with the Issue of Blood’ Matt. 9:20-22; Mk. 5:24-34; Lk. 8:43-48 (Read from Mk. as a group)

If many from the crowd were touching Jesus, why did she alone receive healing? *Answer: Jesus clearly says that her faith made her well. We can see her faith in operation by her actions. She believed that Jesus was able to heal and that if she only touched him, the healing would occur. She was so confident of this that she, although unclean by Law due to her condition, pushed through an entire crowd and made physical contact with a religious teacher.*

Example 2: ‘Healing of the Lame Man in Lystra’ Acts 14:8-10 (Read as a group)

Paul did not speak forth the healing until what happened? Why? *Answer: The text says that Paul told the man to stand on his feet upon perceiving that the man had faith to be made whole. From this we can conclude a few things: first, the faith was a necessary component in this healing; if it wasn't, why did he wait? Second, although Paul most likely had the gift of healing, he was not able to heal at will; faith still needed to be present. Third, the faith of the healing-recipient was highlighted as making the difference. Fourth, Paul doesn't say 'be healed,' but instead commands the man to stand up. He is calling on the individual to step out in faith before the healing has occurred. This matches the principle we saw in James 2.*

Example 3: ‘Healing of the Ten Lepers’ Lk. 17:11-19 (Read as a group)

Although the men ask Jesus to have mercy on them, clearly they are asking to be healed. Jesus responds by sending them to the priest. What is the significance of this? *Answer: In Leviticus 14, lepers who have been healed must be inspected and declared clean by a priest. Thus, the lepers would have understood Jesus to be implying that they would be healed by the time they arrived at the temple. Jesus tells the man who returned that his faith made him well. From this we can conclude that Jesus, just as Paul did in the previous example, forced the men to step out in faith. They had to begin walking to the temple while still leprous, only relying on the belief that what Jesus said would manifest. Their faith caused them to act, just as the principle in James indicates. If one of them hadn't gone, would he have been healed? Probably not. Also, the faith of the recipient was the deciding factor.*

Example 4: ‘Healing at the Gate Called Beautiful’ Acts 3:1-16 (Read as group)

Does Peter explain the mechanism of healing? If so, how is it described? *Answer: Peter describes the healing thus: “his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong . . . and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.” So the power resides in the name of Jesus, but it is the ‘faith in his name’ that appropriates said power. He wraps it all up by affirming that the faith one puts in the name of Jesus comes from Jesus himself.*

Example 5: ‘The Testing of Abraham’ Heb. 11:17-19

Why were Abraham's actions so clear a demonstration of faith? *Answer: knowing the context of the narrative sheds light on how great his faith was. Abraham was 75 years old when God promised to make a great nation out of him. At 100 this promise finally manifested: he had a son. Thus, the only physical means whereby the promise could be fulfilled was Isaac. By killing Isaac, Abraham would have been destroying the only chance of that promise being realized. However, Abraham's faith in God's promise was so great that he believed God would raise the boy from the dead after the sacrifice was through.*

¹ For another example besides these five, see Matt. 9:27-30, wherein Christ has the recipients outwardly confess their faith before he heals them.

The Life of Faith: Lesson 2 (Collecting the Data)

Group B: Faith Producing Positive Outcomes for One who is Represented by Another²

Example 1: ‘Healing of a Paralytic Man’ Matt. 9:1-8; Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 5:17-26 (Read from Mk. as a group)

Jesus responded to whose faith? *Answer: the text says that Jesus forgave the paralytic’s sins when he saw the faith of those lowering him through the roof. It was their faith, and not the man’s, that caused Jesus to respond with healing. Also, we see Jesus again calling for someone to step out in faith. He doesn’t simply say ‘be healed,’ but tells the man to get up and walk.*

Example 2: ‘The Syrophenician Woman’s Daughter’ Matt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30 (Read from Matt. as a group)

Was Jesus going to heal her daughter initially? Why did this change? *Answer: it certainly seems like he did not desire to heal the daughter at first. However, as the woman demonstrated her great faith by repeatedly petitioning the Lord, he responded favorably. The Bible does affirm that faith pleases God (Heb. 11:6), even when it is uncouth (Lk. 18:1-8). Also, the faith of the mother appropriated healing for the afflicted daughter.*

Group C: A Lack of Faith Hindering Positive Outcomes

Example 1: ‘Peter Walks on Water and Sinks’ Matt. 14:22-33 (Read as a group)

Did Jesus rebuke Peter for having no faith, or for not having enough? *Answer: the text shows Jesus calling Peter “you of little faith,” thus we must conclude that Peter didn’t have enough faith. This is important because it points to faith being able to increase and decrease.*

How could Peter have walked all the way to Jesus without sinking? *Answer: Peter clearly had faith when he stepped off of the boat. When he took his eyes off of Jesus and focused on the storm around him, his faith plummeted, as did his body into the water. His faith clearly decreased, because Jesus indicated such. By maintaining his faith in the power of God, Peter could have potentially walked all the way to Christ without sinking. We see from this both the positive ramifications of active faith and the disappearance of those ramifications when faith is deficient.*

Example 2: ‘Nazareth’s Unbelief’ Mk. 6:1-6 (Read as a group)

Why was the power of God hindered? *Answer: the text says that Jesus marveled at their unbelief. The questions that the people were asking were outworkings of their unbelief. This is what hindered the power of God. For clarity’s sake, one must note that in the Greek the negation in verse 5 is doubled, meaning that one could translate that verse as “Jesus was not able to do any miracle whatsoever in that place, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.” Also, the Greek word translated ‘unbelief’ is the negated form of the word for faith. There is no question here that the lack of faith hindered the massive outbreaking of miracles that often happened when Jesus visited a town. Instead, he only healed a few people, those on whom he laid his hands.*

Example 3: ‘The Demon Possessed Boy’ Matt. 17:14-20; Mk. 9:14-29 (Read from Matt. as a group)

Why could the disciples not cast out the demon? *Answer: Jesus clearly says that it was due to their unbelief.*

Had they already been commissioned to perform exorcisms? Had they been successful at doing so? *Answer: the answer is yes to both of these questions. In Matt. 10:8 they were given authority over demons, and in Mk. 6:13 they successfully cast out demons. From this we can draw a few conclusions: spiritual gifts work in tandem with faith. Although the disciples had been given authority by Jesus himself, they still were unable to do so not long afterward due to unbelief. Also, he scolds them for having little faith, not an absence of faith. Lastly, the unbelief of the practitioner, not the one receiving prayer, was the cause of the impotence.*

² For another example besides these two, see Matt. 8:5-13, wherein the Centurion comes to Jesus asking for his servant to be healed. It is the great faith of the Centurion that causes Jesus to marvel and appropriates healing for another.

The Life of Faith: Lesson 3 (Defining and Applying Faith)

Defining Faith from Hebrews 11

Although the definition of faith is plainly written in Hebrews 11, it was necessary for us to see it in action several times over before considering this verse. The passage reads as follows: “Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen.” The word ‘reality’ (ὑπόστασις in the Greek) could also be rendered ‘substance,’ although ‘reality’ is better. The reason I choose this translation over ‘confidence’ (as some translations prefer), is that the author of Hebrews consistently portrays existence as a dualism: this physical, temporal reality exists concurrently with the spiritual, eternal reality. He does this frequently when speaking of Christ’s sublime sacrifice and also in chapter 11 when describing the faith of the patriarchs. The Old Testament saints were connected to that heavenly city even while sojourning in earthly cities here on Earth. Their faith was that connection. Thus, faith is the reality, or substance, of that which is hoped for. Those things promised by God, that which we will appropriate fully upon being in his heavenly presence, are grasped by us even now through faith. This faith granted to us by God allows us to pierce the fabric between the physical and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal, enabling us to preview those future blessings here and now. This matches what we see in the Gospel narratives: individuals exert faith and thereby appropriate physical blessedness that belongs to the future while in the present. Faith connects us with the unchanging power of God, and when that happens, all things are possible.

Applying Faith through Prayer and Action

Example 1: ‘The Prayer of Faith’ James 5:13-18 (Read as a group)

What is the condition that must be met in order for the prayer mentioned in the passage to be efficacious? *Answer: the text says that the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. The one praying must be convinced that God will hear his prayer.*

What is the significance of James mentioning Elijah? *Answer: first, we find out that Elijah prayed for the rain to stop. In the original narrative (1 Kg. 17:1-7), there is no mention of him praying for this, but only that he prophesied. So we see that even a prophet of God who knew that the Lord had spoken still prayed into that word which he prophesied. God utilizes our faith-filled prayers. Second, James makes clear that no distinction exists between Elijah and us. Our faith and prayers are just as valid before the Lord.*

Example 2: ‘The Lesson of the Fig Tree’ Mk. 11:12-14, 20-25 (Read as a group)

What is the condition that a believer is to abide by when praying? If this condition is met, what is the limit on that person’s prayer according to this verse? *Answer: the one praying is supposed to have faith. Jesus makes it very clear by saying that one is supposed to believe that he has already received that for which he is asking; this is very strong language! If it wasn’t straight from Jesus, we would probably be tempted to label it as ‘word of faith’ heresy. However, it isn’t. There seems to be no limitation on prayers lifted up with this kind of faith. Even though this is the case, we must understand that this isn’t a license to pray for any frivolous thing, expecting our vain impulses to be granted by God as if he were a genie. We are to pray according to his generally revealed will. I will explain this more thoroughly in the epilogue.*

Example 3: ‘Greater Works’ Jn. 14: 12-14 (Read as a group)

What is the condition that must be met in order for one to do ‘greater works?’ *Answer: Jesus says that one must ‘believe.’ Note that the Greek word for faith is πίστις, which is connected to the verb πιστεύω, that is, the verb translated ‘to believe’ in this verse. In Greek ‘to believe’ is identical in meaning to ‘to have faith.’ So one must believe, or have faith, in order to do these greater works. Also, interpreting the ‘greater works’ as being a greater number of works because of the many Christians that would soon populate the earth is weak because the text says ‘the one who believes.’ It is singular. It seems to be saying that those who believed would do even greater things than Christ. I have to admit that this is hard for me to believe, but maybe that’s the problem.*

What is the condition and purpose of answered prayers? *Answer: the condition is that we pray in the name of Christ. The purpose is that the Father be glorified. When faith-filled prayers are answered in the name of Christ, this brings glory to the Father; we are ultimately participating in an activity that clearly glorifies God!*

Example 4: ‘The Persistent Widow’ Lk. 18:1-8 (Read as a group)

What was the purpose of this parable? *Answer: in the first verse, the text says that Jesus told them a parable so that they would always pray and not lose heart.*

The persistence in prayer encouraged by Jesus is an indication of the individual’s what? *Answer: it indicates their faith, for Jesus asks whether he will find faith on the earth. This is important because it proves that possessing faith manifests in continual petition. Some think that repeatedly praying for something shows a lack of faith. Jesus doesn’t seem to think so.*

Example 5: ‘Teach Us How to Pray’ Lk. 11:1-13 (Read as a group)

This entire discourse is a response to what request? *Answer: the disciples asked that Jesus teach them how to pray. This whole discourse is the response, which must be kept in mind. He begins basically with the Lord’s Prayer, a basic guideline for prayer. He then gives a parable about being persistent and very bold in prayer, as a man who bangs on his friend’s door at midnight until he receives the provision he needs. Lastly, he affirms that the Lord will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. It seems that he is giving a suggestion as to that for which we ought to pray. Luke, who also wrote Acts, therein shows several examples of believers seeking the Lord and subsequently having the Spirit poured out on them. Our objective in prayer is to lift up godly petitions before the Lord in faith and also to seek him for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, whose presence will transform us into that which God has called us to be.*

The Life of Faith: Epilogue

Reviewing the Data

Now that we've gone through the biblical data, a few things are abundantly clear: first, when a Christian exerts faith in the power of God, objective results often occur; second, in a moment of prayer, the faith of the one praying, the one being prayed for, and even those simply in attendance all play a role in the outcome; third, of the dozen examples we have considered of faith accessing and stifling power, almost all of them concern divine healing; fourth, perseverance in prayer is a sign of faith and is recommended by Jesus; fifth, bold confidence in prayer is a sign of faith and is recommended by Jesus.

Addressing a Few Concerns

This teaching will undoubtedly bring up a few concerns. I have lumped them into three categories: first, this sounds like 'name it and claim it' theology; isn't that heresy? Second, I don't know God's will for everything; what if it's not his will to do that for which I am asking? Third, God has predestined all things, but you are contradicting that by saying that my faith can change a situation.

First, this is not 'name it and claim it.' The Bible teaches that faith, faith-filled actions, and faith-filled prayers have a powerful effect. However, one of the aspects of 'name it and claim it' is the propensity for people to take any verse, even if completely out of context, and claim it as a promise for themselves. That isn't a good idea. One should pray for things that are applicable to them based upon context, or things that God has revealed specifically to the individual.

Second, God never requires us to know his secret will. Furthermore, think about the nature of prayer. God knows that we are not privy to his hidden will, yet he invites us to pray. Moreover, Jesus instructs us to pray with great confidence and persistence. The question of 'is this according to God's will?' is not the exact question we should be asking, for most of the time this is impossible to know. Instead, we should ask ourselves 'does this fall within God's generally revealed will?' Do not pray for something selfish, or some other thing that is clearly outside of God's will according to Scripture. However, if it does fall within what God generally does, such as healing and the salvation of the lost, go for it. You wouldn't refrain from sharing the Gospel with someone because you didn't know if God was going to save the person, so why would you not pray for healing because of the same? We shouldn't just assume that God put a sickness on the individual. Why isn't it just as reasonable to assume that he wants to heal him? Let this suffice for this concern.

Third, the Bible does not explicitly teach that all events that ever occur are predestined. However, we will assume for the sake of argument that they are. Just because the Bible affirms predestination does not mean that the numerous clear examples of faith's efficacy are false. They must harmonize somehow, even if we cannot comprehend the means. I suggest that our faith and prayers are necessary 'cog wheels' in the machine whereby God executes his will. They are only necessary because God, in his sovereignty, designed it to be such. So instead of assuming that God would have you refrain from praying due to his secret will, simply trust that God knew what he was doing when he commanded us to pray with boldness and persistence.

Applying this Knowledge

Now that we have seen this demonstrated continually by the text of Scripture, how are we to apply it to our lives? Remember that James tells us that faith without works is dead. To see this evidence and then say that we now believe it is not enough; we must act. It is contained in the Scripture for a reason. God desires his people to be bold and persistent in prayer, and also to step out in faith, believing in him for mighty things.

I recommend that one apply this knowledge directly to areas that are within God's generally-revealed will. For instance, we know that God desires all to reach repentance, and that he commanded his disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations. For this reason we should begin praying diligently for God to soften the hearts of unbelievers we know, and also should ask him to give us opportunities to share the Gospel. But if we are praying for this in faith, we must obey the Spirit's unctations when these opportunities arrive; faith without works is dead. If we pray for God to save sinners with whom we are interacting while also being faithful to actively share the truth, some will come to salvation. Not everyone whom we evangelize will be saved; however, knowing that we play a crucial role in this process, it is evident that God has foreordained situations wherein we will effectively deliver the Gospel to someone seeking truth.

I also recommend that the individual who goes through this course pray that people be healed. There must be a reason why almost every example of this from the Gospels and Acts is associated with physical healing. Under the new covenant, healing through a human agent is something that God seems to do more frequently. The best way to practice this is to actually lay hands on the individual, pray that God would heal them right then, then after the prayer ask the person to judge whether any improvement has occurred. So when praying for an injury, ask the person if there has been any change in the pain, or ask them to do something that was not previously possible. If an individual believes the New Testament's witness concerning faith and starts to pray for people, that person will eventually start seeing people get healed. Healing doesn't manifest on every occasion. However, when one begins to pray for it in faith, miraculous events will happen much more frequently than if no prayers, or weak, doubt-filled prayers, are offered up.

Lastly, praying for the revival of the Body of Christ is always an important petition to perpetuate. God desires his bride to be faithful and to love him. This theme is found all throughout Scripture. Thus, one can pray with complete boldness for awakening to come into the Church. It is God's will. Blessings on walking out this faith journey with the Lord!